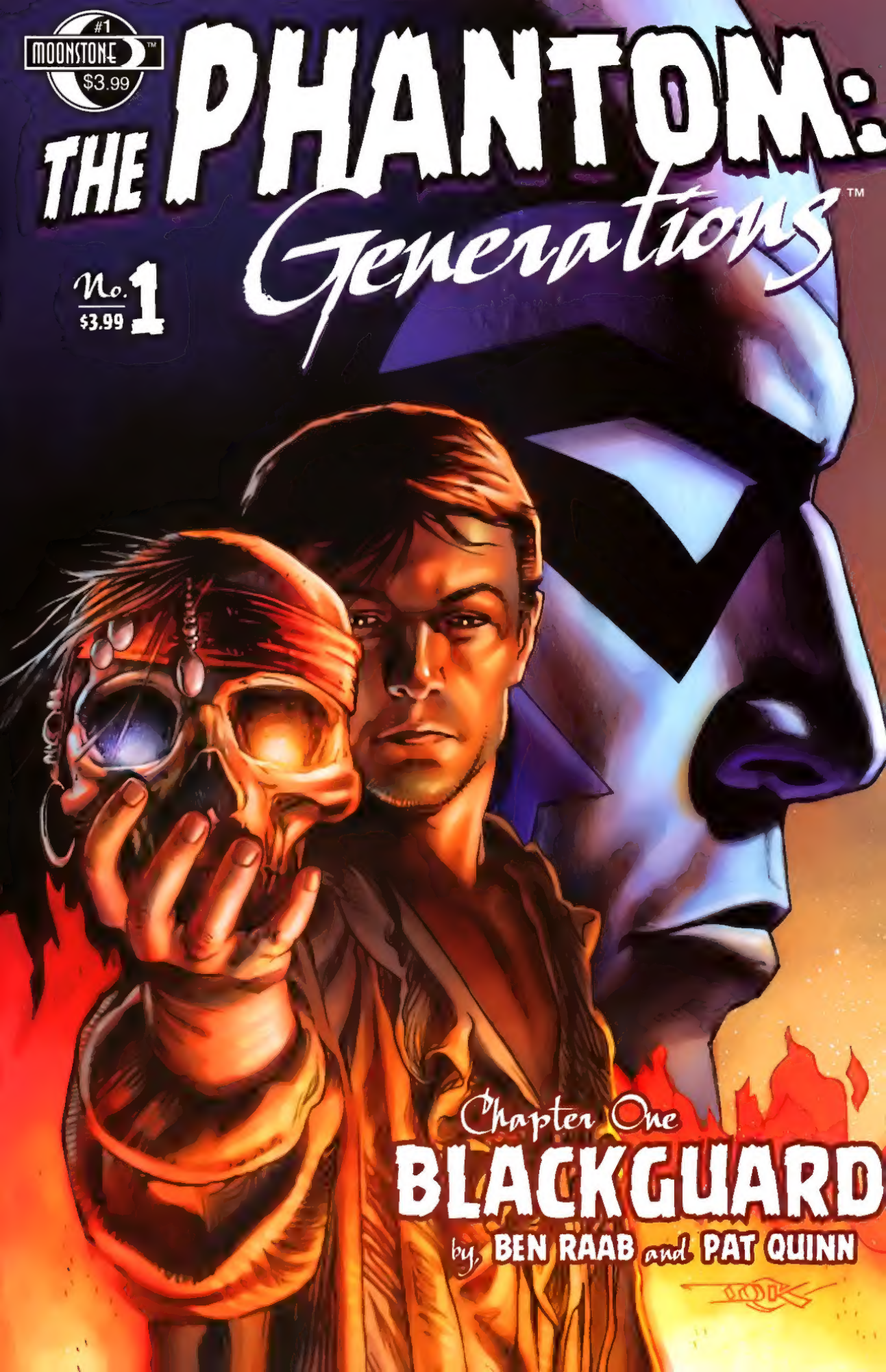
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Generations
No. 1
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Chapter One
BLACKGUARD
by BEN RAAB and PAT QUINN

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28, May
in The Year Of Our Lord
Fifteen-Hundred and Fifty-six

O, joyous day! O, rapturous event!

'Tis with glee effusive and pride o'erflowing that I am pleased to chronicle what has transpired this very morn... How the Good Lord, in His infinite grace and boundless mercy saw fit to bestow upon my beauteous bride and I the truest and sincerest blessing for which any man could e'er wish...

A SON!

Hale... hearty... brimming with vim and bursting with vigor... Kit Walker quit his mother's womb 'pon the cock's crow, eager to begin the grand adventure his life shall no doubt be. And with his arrival comes a realization, one I have long anticipated ere my beloved Christina revealed unto me the life growing within her... but, alas, could not fully fathom 'til the nonce.

In the span of a lightning flash, the benighted world as I once knew it is vanished, fore'er lost to the realm of Memory. And in its place a new one stands, bright and shining. Illuminated and enlightened am I. Henceforth, my life—and legacy—are but mine own no more.

For on this day, I am a *FATHER*...

13 June

Yet again doth the dust of Sleep encrust these leaden, languid eyes! Weary am I of the obdurate, unremitting wailing! A fortnight has lapsed and I cannot recall an absolute span of uninterrupted rest! Will I e'er drift away to the realm of Slumber again—or will my son's incessant woe lock the gates and dispose of the key to Morpheus's nocturnal realm e'ermore? Zounds!

(Was I such a banshee as a babe?? Were it so, you have my humblest of apologies, father! I pray for your long-departed soul's forgiveness! At long last, I *understand*...)

14 June

'Pon retrospection of the previous day's entry, I am ashamed. Too quick to protest was I. And unjustly so... For Young Kit knows not the repercussions of his deeds. How could he? By what scale hath he the means to weigh the right and wrong of his habit? He merely acts 'pon impulse and need... ineffable in any form other than the lugubrious cry of listlessness, the jarring shriek of discomfort or the monotonous yawp of hunger unsated...

Of all the Virtues I must exhibit on my son's behalf... that he too should know the proper way to comport himself when he is of age... Patience must take precedent. As Christina is all-too swift to hearken... he is but an *innocent*...

17 June

The hour is late, and Kit the Younger has drifted off at long last. May his journey through the realm of Morpheus be sweet and without fright or fit...

Alas, there shall be no sleep for Kit the Elder this night. The jungle drums doth pound the rhythms of distress in the distance. Once more am I summoned. I *must* heed the call...

Yet, in all sincerity, I do so with a pang of disquietude both unfamiliar and unsettling. For a sliver of uncertainty has penetrated the shield of my most guarded thoughts and cast a pall of doubt 'pon my most sacred oath.

What Fate awaits me on this latest escapade?

Life... or Death?

24 August

Ere his life was cut short before mine eyes by the blood-soaked blade of that accursed sea-scourge, Kabai Singh, my father did impart unto me wisdom whose echoes resound in my heart and conscience to this very day. Said he:

"Family is a treasure whose valuable eclipses e'en the brightest and most precious of stones. Guard it with thy life!"

Tho' fleet as the whirling wind was our courtship, that Christina and I subscribed to such philosophy in equal measure was early apparent in our relations. Forsooth, had our minds been constellations more perfectly align'd they could not have been. Yet whilst I—an orphan—drew solace from our emotional synchronicity, a void in my beloved's heart did grow, most evident whilst she carried our child within her womb... an insatiable longing for the company of her Norwegian kin to whom an unbreakable lock of her soul remained tethered. Countless missives did she dispatch, regaling them, in absentia, with tales of womb kicks and morning sickness...

Comprehend the depths of her longing I could not 'til the very moments after Kit's birth... O, the bittersweet glint in Christina's eye as she, cradling him for the first time, did gaze o'er my shoulder, seeking the smiling countenances of her father and mother—only to find the ancient, wizened features of the Bandar Shaman ministering to her recovery. Short of trekking o'er sea and land, how to satiate her yearning to have her family by her side to share in our joy?

Blessed be Dame Fortune for sparing such misadventures as would surely have befallen us had we undertaken so treacherous a journey... Rather, 'pon a galleon quietly put into port under cover of darkness did She deposit a little bit of home on Bangallan shores in the person of Christina's most belov'd cousin—Nils Gyldenhår (and his hulkish, brooding bondsman, Audun).

But, alas and alack! How swiftly the sweet reunion was soured! For tidings most grim did he bear...

"Heavy is mine heart that the burden of bearing such tidings should fall 'pon these shoulders, but bear them I must out of love and devotion to you, my dearest cousin..."

With these words—gently spoken, yet jarring to the senses—did Nils preface his accounting of the tragedy befallen my beloved's kinsmen half a world away nearly a fortnight ago. A calamity narrowly survived by he and his bondsman, there but to serve as proxies in the delivery of a gift for their first and only grandchild...

"A band of brigands seeking plunder, 'twas, who breached the walls and laid silent siege to our ancestral estate, 'neath the cloak of darkness, 'round midnight. But for the braying of their horses champing at the bits, the brazen thieves would have escaped with booty a'plenty, leaving the Lord of the manor none the wiser of his loss. Awakened by the tumult, thy stalwart sire did bravely take up arms in defense of his property—and thy mother. Would that Eric the Rover's sword had been as strong and steely as his resolve, a thousand score of such blackguards would he have bested... Alas, by the moment of my arrival in the master chambers—grimly spotted with the crimson stains of his courageous defiance—the cause was lost and the cowardly butchers hied to the shadows whence they came..."

O, heart-wrenching account! O, miserable tale!

Yea, tho' this distressing intelligence did my heart crack, the depths of my sorrow were but the merest puddle against the vast, unfathomable ocean of Christina's grief. Would that I had the power to transcend time and traverse space that I might undo the grisly deed—or, in the least, the words to console my dearest heart...

With neither suitable wit nor substantive wisdom to shield her 'gainst Misery's cruel sting, the least I could proffer was the shelter of mine arms...

1 September

A week has lapsed, yet Christina's woes hath not. Doth she think me blind as she hastens to wipe the tears a'borning in her eyes? Yea, how could I not! All too well do I know the pain of loss that now torments her heart... As doth her cousin... 'Pon his return from a brief sojourn amongst the local tribes—on matters of commerce, he claims (bereft of Audun's presence, oddly)—Nils hath volunteered to ferry Christina homeward that she might execute her filial duties, whilst bidding a final, fond farewell to her redoubtable father and steadfast mother.

As the sole descendant possessing an heir, 'pon her shoulders doth the stewardship of her family's extensive fortune and property holdings rest. A burden I am newly come to suspect that Nils—eldest son of her father's brother, and the rightful successor, but for the lack of an heir—would gladly shoulder in her stead should she deign relinquish it. The rapacious sort, he strikes me, during the brief span I have come to make his acquaintance...

Yet, for all her responsibilities abroad, cleave herself from Young Kit, Christina simply cannot bear to do. Not after Nils's insinuation that counted amongst the articles pillaged from her family's ancestral home were the very missives she did dispatch chronicling his journey to this world... In light of this strange intelligence, I cannot help but wonder what value could such documents hold for any other than her immediate family? Could there be some veiled intrigue at work here not yet plain to my ken?? Do forces most sinister seek conspiracy 'gainst the three of us as well???

Nay, o'erwrought am I with baseless suppositions—likely the ill-timed result of diminished sleep. Surely that which transpired half a world away, in the land of the fjords, is an incident unto itself. It is illogic to posit a connection 'twixt a murder on foreign shores and our babe yet new to the world. Lest a corporeal reason present itself that merits further speculation, none shall I give it...

14 September

Doubtless thou art bemused by the sudden passage of time. Forgive my aberrant delinquency; the harrowing events that transpired betwixt this account and its predecessor—thereby shackling these hands, and this narrative—shall I now assay to chronicle below...

Whilst Christina and Young Kit remained with the Bandar, 'pon an errand of diplomatic import I did embark... a territorial dispute, pitting the seafaring Touroo tribe 'gainst their land-locked neighbors, the Llongo... Intent 'pon increasing his tribe's resources, the Llongo Chieftain did dispatch several of his best hunters coastward that they might entrap all manner of game for their people. Unbeknownst to the huntsmen, a claim 'pon the invaded cove had the Touroo already made. A skirmish ensued...

Tho' no lives were lost, the untimely mêlée did give rise to the regrettable consequence of bringing these neighbors—long allied in times of peace and war—to the brink of conflict. Lest any further blood be shed, I did counsel the adoption of a pact granting each tribe seasonal utility of the disputed waters. To the Llongo would belong the Spring and Autumn. To the Touroo, the Summer and Winter...

Confident of their mutual acceptance of the terms of my proposal, my return to the Bandar village I did prepare. Yet, ere I could fill my saddle with the necessary provisions, a sound filled my ears—and mine heart—with such sudden and unexpected dread, I pray to ne'er to hear it again. 'Twas the jungle drums beckoning me with a message most grim:

"Son of Phantom... *TAKEN*..."

To the Bandar village I raced, the wind whipping my flesh with the sting of a thousand lashes! O, that I could draw back the sands of Time and prevent the dastardly deed ere it had been done! Alas, such power doth no man possess. Not e'en a father...

From Chief Turan—his ever-resilient eyes uncharacteristically shaken and fearful—did I receive an account of the *abduction*...

'Twas during a sacred feast that the blackguard struck, purloining a cask of the Bandar Shaman's herbal remedies and covertly plying the revelers' drink with it to induce artificial slumber. Ere the soporific effects had abated, the villain fled, taking with him—from the arms of his own mother!—a prize whose value cannot be measured. my son!

A hunting party, six men strong—the Bandar's fiercest warriors—did Turan dispatch to hunt Kit's captor down. Yet, by my arrival, no word had returned of the outcome of their pursuit. With the speed of a Lioness deft from her cubs, did Christina spring to her feet, grasp the nearest blade and hasten for her mount! Verily, did her fury blaze brighter than e'en a thousand suns at midday! But for my insistence that she return to the Skull Cave whilst this unfortunate drama did play, would she have given chase 'round the farthest reaches of the globe to hunt he who brazenly stripped the flesh of her flesh from the sanctuary of her bosom.

Despite her entreaty to help bring the villain to justice, in good conscience allow her to partake in such an adventure I could not. Not for any shortcoming or frailty of her sex—O, how keen this woman's steel had proven itself in battle many a'time before!—but for the fact that I knew not who our invisible foe might be, or wherefore he would undertake such a fool's errand. Lacking such intelligence, were we both to venture out into the unknown, our safety would be twice jeopardized... as would our son's future should we succeed in his rescue, yet fail to survive the mission. Risk making him an orphan, I simply could not...

Tho' Christina did protest the substance of my argument, she could not argue the sensibility of its logic. Thus, with heart most heavy did she hie homeward whilst the chase I did join...

Ignorant whether Time be friend or foe, into the Deep Woods I did venture. 'Pon my lips, a prayer—beseeching the Good Lord spare my son further travail, but rather deliver him unto me, alive and bereft of injury. Would that my pleas could have spared the Bandar warriors, as well...

Massacred, they were, by no beast of these Deep Woods, but by the blade of a man... his steel defiling their flesh with such inhuman brutality the likes of which not e'en the most savage tribesman would inflict 'pon a most hated enemy! Tho' 'twas clearly the work of butcher, a berserker and a madman... was it he who snatched my son?

Alas, all eyes that bore witness here were now dark, their souls gone into the Eternal Night—or so I presumed. For what I first took as the portent of a consummate slaughter soon proved otherwise with the pained, prolonged gasping of a lone hunter. To the survivor's side I did hasten, hoping he might offer some wisdom as to the identity of our foe. Pressing leaves to his wounds—a dam to staunch the seemingly ceaseless flow of crimson through my fingertips—I did await his recollection of recent events...

The entire affair he did summarize with but a word in his native tongue.

"Norseman."

'Twas if lightning smote me where I stood. Would that it had... For whilst my jaw went slack, and my eyes stared, agape, my senses ensnared by the web of intrigue within which my family had so unexpectedly become entangled...

...the thief didst make plain his identity...

A true monster was Audun, inhuman in both stature and savagery. Quarter he did not ask—nor would he have granted it had I entreated the same—for the Norseman's purpose was as plain as his halberd was sharp. No less than my execution did he seek...

O, the ring of clashing steel—cleaving the stillness of the darkened forest, cutting the night in twain—as we parried, blow for blow, each seeking supremacy in battle! Many men have I fought whose strength outmatched—and whose skill in combat outshone—my own. Yet, none gave me pause quite so much as the leviathan in the service of Christina's cousin...

With a blinding blow to the temple—delivered swifter than the feet of fabled Mercury—did he tip the balance of the skirmish in his favor. Like a tree, felled by the axe man's blade, I did topple, my sword slipping from my suddenly flaccid grasp. And as I fell, so too did my masque—the lone veil dividing Christopher Standish from the Phantom. Through eyes unfocused I did gape at the behemoth looming o'er me—his eyes locked 'pon my bare, exposed face, his halberd raised to deliver a killing stroke...

In that moment, did my life flash before me. The myriad experiences that shaped me into the man I am today. My father's death at the hands of the Singh Pirates... finding salvation amongst the Bandar... the swearing of my Sacred Oath... my love for Christina... But above all, the moment that hath given new meaning to my existence—the birth of my son.

For Young Kit did I resume the fight and o'ertake Audun. Cracking the brute's arm o'er my knee, I did unseat his halberd from his massive fist. Into the dirt we then did grapple, scrambling o'er one another to reclaim our weapons. 'Pon the recovery of his sword did Audun resume his bull-like charge... 'til an errant vine, protruding haphazardly from the ground, proved his undoing. His foot entwined, his balance compromised, his ankle twisted, he tumbled to the Earth and fall upon his own steely blade...

As I have come to learn of late, this very incident has borne a superstition amongst the tribes of the Deep Woods...a saying whispered from village to village...

"He who sees the Phantom's face dies a horrible death."

O, how the revelation of Audun's complicity in Kit's capture did confound my senses! Wherefore would the servant of Christina's closest kin enact such a deed? For his own gain? Or worse—for his master's?? O, terrible thought! For the life of my boy, still missing, unravel this riddle I must... so to the docks I did hasten...

There, did I glimpse a sight both reassuring yet disquieting all at once... For tho' the presence of Nils's vessel yet tethered and a'loll in the harbor did eliminate a portion of my fears, the appearance of Christina's mare hitched to its broadside did heap 'pon them concerns anew. One life, dearer to me than mine own, had I sought to save. Yet now the fate of two 'pon my shoulders did rest...

With the silent grace of the jungle cat did I infiltrate yon vessel. Slowly, stealthily I crept, deeper and deeper into the bowels of the ship, 'til at last I heard a wailing so familiar, so unmistakable, there could be no doubt as to its source! O, happy sound! Ne'er before was his caterwauling such music to mine ears! To Nils's quarters I did hie, and there, nestled snugly within a reed basket the likes of which ferried Moses down the river Nile, I found my boy! Into my arms I did raise him, grateful to the Good Lord for his safe deliverance. Alas, there was little time for celebration...

For suddenly in the doorway did Christina materialize—pistol press'd aside her head, prisoner of her cousin. His treachery laid bare, the villain sought to enact his final gambit. Though not a component of his original plan—insidiously focused solely on Kit—Christina's unexpected arrival aboard his vessel provided unto him a fortuitous opportunity indeed... With but a pinch of flintlock, would he execute her—thereby eliminating the lone obstacle betwixt him and their vast family fortune. To Norway would he then abscond, Young Kit in tow. And with him, the means necessary to establish his claim as the rightful successor...

...Or so he would have done, had a blow to the snout from Christina's good right arm not undone his scheme ere he could unleash the fatal shot...

Seizing 'pon Nils'ſ momentary diſablement to diſencumber myſelf—thereby reuniting Young Kit with with hiſ mother at laſt!—I unſheathed my ſword from itſ ſcabbard. Preſuming the advantage mine, with a leopard'ſ ſwiftneſſ I did pounce—only to find my abdomen greeted by the razor-keen blade of Nils'ſ halberd! Fool waſ I to aſſume thiſ pampered child of privilege knew not the waſ of the ſword. If not my ſuperior, at the very leaſt, waſ he my equal. No more would I undereſtimate him henceforth...

Steel in hand, we came at each other like men poſſeſſ'd! Ev'ry thruſt met with a parry... ev'ry parry met with a feint... ev'ry feint challenge'd by another thruſt... And ſo it went, our mêlée laying waſte to yon compartment whilſt we bludgeon'd one another! Yet, in war there can be but one victor. But for hiſ haſte to ſlit my throat whilſt I lay proſtrate at hiſ feet—brought down by the ſucking gaſh carved into my belly—to Nils would the day have gone. Yet, hiſ pride, 'twaſ, that ultimately undid him. For whilſt hiſ mouth did gloat o'er the acquiſition of hiſ forthcoming riches, my ſtrong right hand hiſ eyes did ignore...

Graſping hiſ wriſt, I wreſted control of hiſ arm and drove that halberd into the villain'ſ boot! Succumbing to the pain, to the floor he did crumple—only to then find hiſ piſtol within arm'ſ reach! With hate in eyes and a curſe 'pon hiſ lipſ, he ſet hiſ ſightſ 'pon me, cocked the hammer—and unleaſhed the trigger! Aſ the gunſhot echo'd, my ſword arm—aſ if by inſtinct—did ſwiftly riſe to meet the hurtling projectile! My blade ſtruck, the iron ball did careen back at he who ſent it, delivering unto him a fatal blow! One laſt heartbeat, then with eyes agape and lifeleſſ, Nils did fall... and, in falling, unveil the evidence condemning him aſ the true architect of my wife'ſ parent'ſ murder—*Chriſtina'ſ purloined letterſ!*

Aſ if no revelation could be any more harrowing than thiſ, my eyes did ſuddenly eſpy an image that chillſ me to the marrow to thiſ very day. There, emblazoned 'pon the fleſh of hiſ inner arm, a mark of *ſeven circleſ*... the inſignia of the Singh Brotherhood!!!

A plot to commit murder and usurp my wife's family fortune... a bid to abduct my son... all perpetrated by a man to whom I was kin by marriage, a scoundrel in league with the dreaded Singh pirates. Coincidence—or conspiracy? Would that I had the Sight of a Shaman, such a riddle I might possess the power to unravel. Alas, such skills are beyond the likes of me...

That Nils Gyldenhår came to these shores ignorant of my dual identity, I am confident. Though known by many throughout these Deep Woods the Phantom may be, that he and Christopher Standish are one and the same is a secret guarded by a select, trustworthy few. So how, then, was it that my wife's cousin came to be an agent of my most hated enemies...?

If betwixt the Man and the Myth, the living and the legendary, a connection the Singh have begun to draw, I must remain e'er vigilant and gird myself—and those I treasure above all else—against future conflict. For like He Who Slithered in Eden's verdant groves, those slimy serpents are e'er coil'd and ready to strike...

Someday, like all men, I will die. By whose hand, only the Good Lord Himself can say. But with my death, an end shall give rise to a new beginning, and unto you, my son, shall this mantle pass. For that is my most Sacred Oath... and your Destiny.

Guard it well...

With pride e'erlasting, your father,

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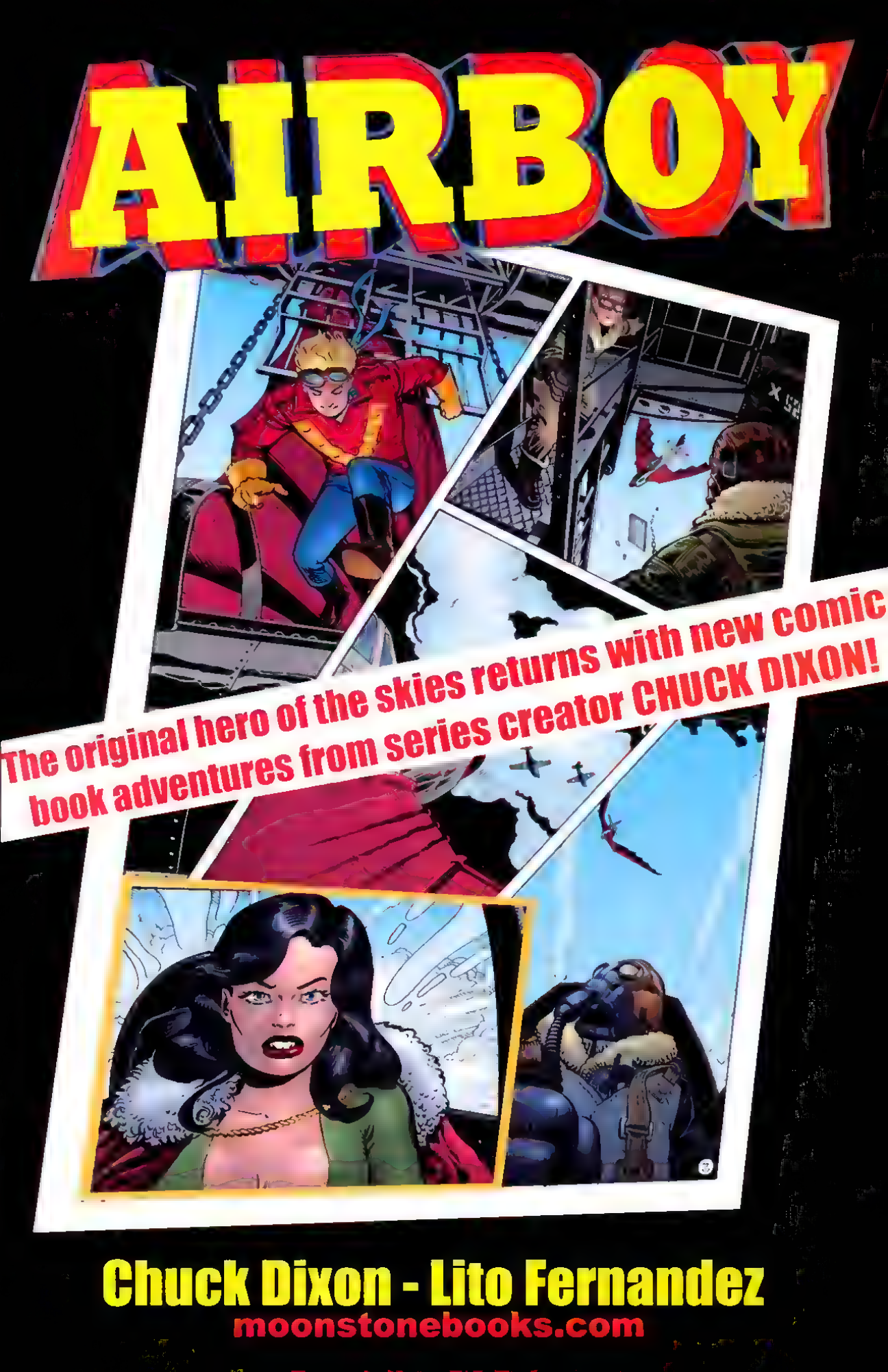

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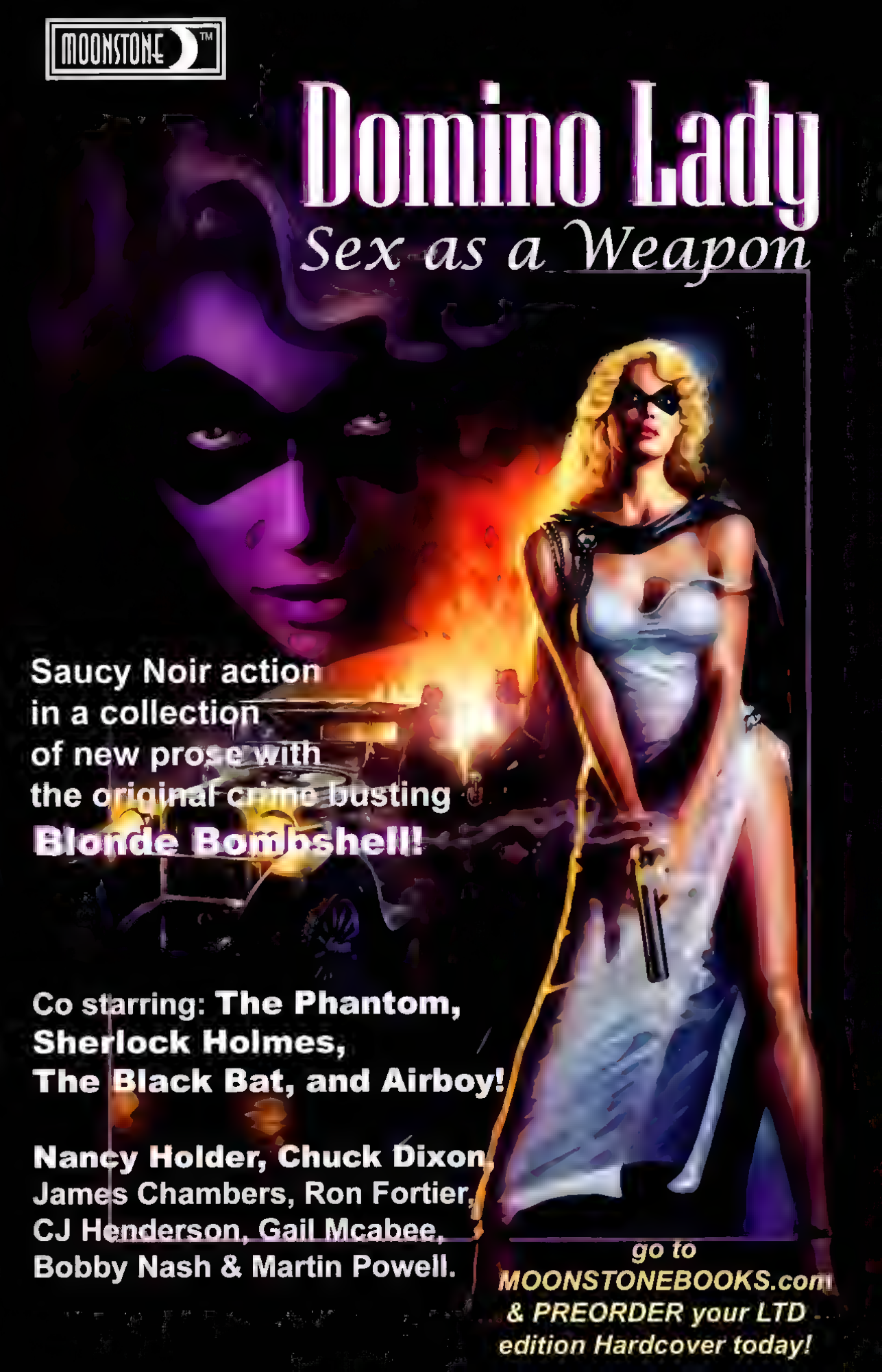
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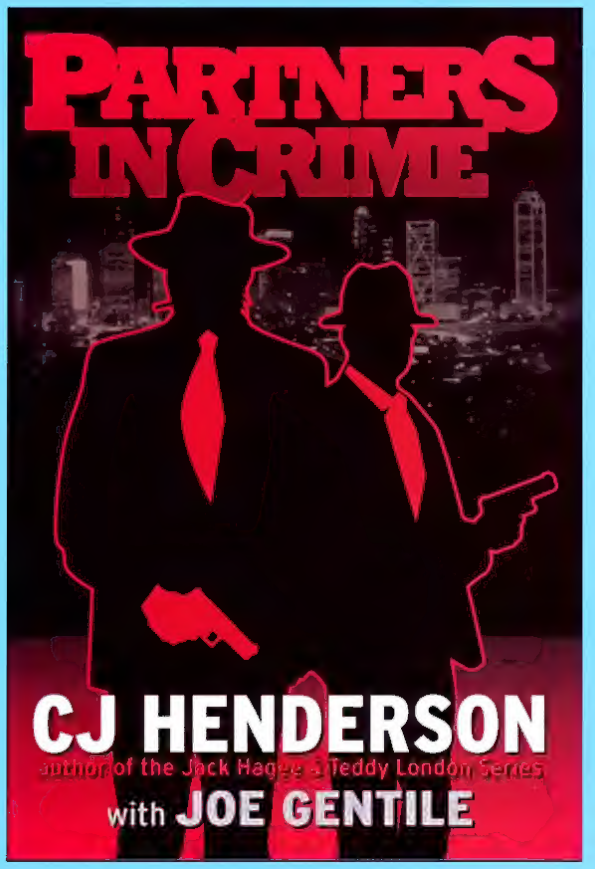

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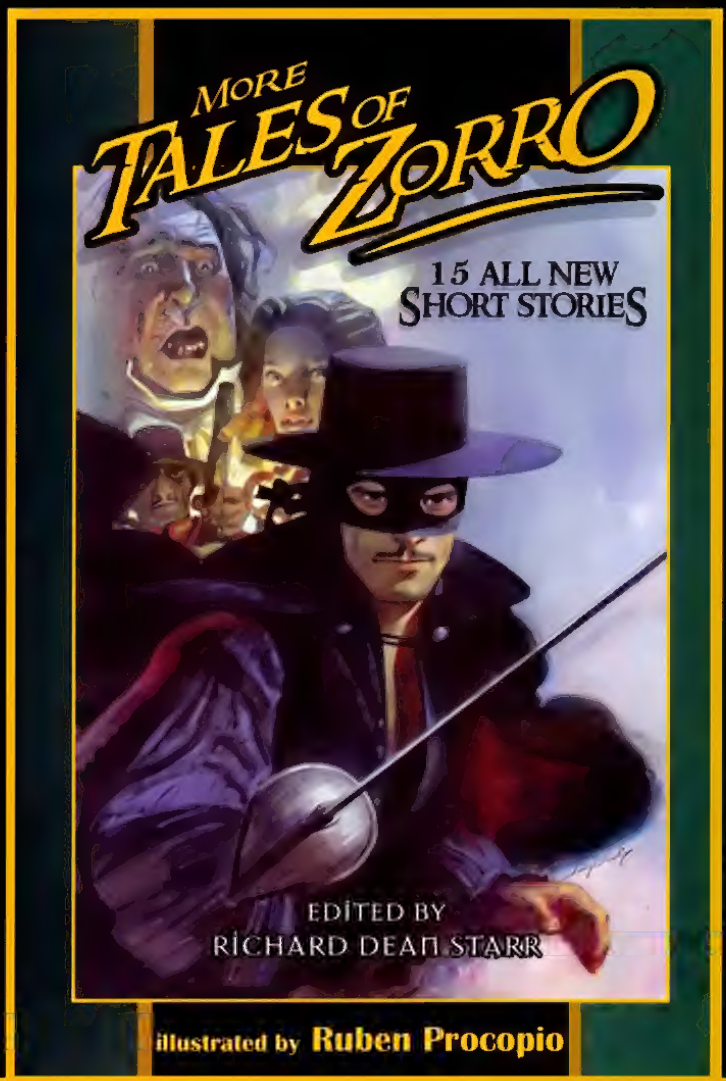

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